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In his 2017 book, *Beyond Test Scores: A Better Way to Measure School Accountability* (Harvard University Press), Jack Schneider posits, as his title implies, a “better way” to measure what matters most in American schools. His book is critical of the longstanding national drive to reduce the conception of good schooling to the thinnest possible measures, ongoing in its current form since the 1980s and the infamous *A Nation at Risk* report. Schneider’s book is only one of a great many titles aimed directly at this project of reducing “school quality” to shallow conceptions of literacy and mathematical acumen. But unlike most books on the subject, which merely show the inadequacy of the accountability regime, Schneider goes much further, developing an alternative approach: the multifaceted “Somerville School Quality Index,” (pp. 96-149) a research-based index of quality built to address a pluralistic and comprehensive conception of what really matters in American schools.

In opposition to the contemporary practice of viewing standardized tests as the primary objective measure of student ability, and, by extension, school quality, Schneider builds a model consisting of 35 essential factors — based on local surveys — that provide the substantive information that American communities most want to know about their schools and their students’ experiences. With this in mind, Schneider’s intention with this book is not only to walk the reader through better ways of identifying and measuring school quality, but also to show district and school leaders how to engage in these better measurement projects themselves.

The initial move of the Somerville school quality index is to divide the 35 essential factors of quality schooling into two overarching categories: “essential inputs” and “key outcomes.” While the school quality debate of the past few decades has mainly focused on outcomes, and while this might have been a reasonable, if reactionary, response to a prior era that focused almost exclusively on inputs, Schneider’s book reminds its readers of the commonsense truism that both matter. Schneider then subdivides these overarching categories further: the essential inputs are split into “school culture,” “teachers and the teaching environment,” and “resources,” and the key outcomes go under “academic learning” and “character and well-being.” Ultimately, Schneider’s Somerville school quality index reveals our schools as complex ecosystems which require evaluation tools commensurate with the complexity of the ecosystems themselves. And that matters. If good schooling in a large and varied sense is something that we honestly desire from compulsory public education, Schneider’s index represents a significant step forward in our ability to identify and understand its component parts.

Schneider’s introduction invites us into his book much the same way most Americans come to considerations of schooling and school quality: through the eyes of a parent hoping to make better sense of their community’s educational options. What strikes Schneider as
most dangerous is the seeming disparity between the Boston Globe’s assessment of the Somerville schools and the general sentiment and public perceptions of the same schools by his fellow community members. Somervillians tended “to express relatively high levels of confidence” (p. 2) in their schools, regardless of what the data might say. And as Schneider is quick to note, Somervillians are not unique in this way. In fact, many Americans respond in similar positive ways to their local schools with little regard to the “doom-and-gloom rhetoric that dominates headlines about the nation’s educational woes” (p. 2).

From this opening anecdote, Schneider runs through the basic limitations of using standardized tests as the sole measure of school quality, recounting the history of how American schools backed themselves into this corner — a history that includes the ineffective steps they have taken to back themselves out. Unlike other similarly-oriented texts, Schneider concedes the value of standardized tests, only lamenting the tendency to misapply them. He acknowledges that tests provide “useful information for educators and policymakers as they seek to track student progress and allocate resources” (p. 16), but there are a host of tasks for which tests are not well-suited, and for which they are even counterproductive.

Schneider articulates a number of problems that standardized tests present, particularly in their tendency to skew our conceptions of student ability. Often delivered in the form of multiple-choice questions, standardized tests can tell us something about a student’s ability to recall knowledge, but remain very limited in what they can say about a student’s ability to synthesize, analyze, and apply that knowledge. Further, while standardized multiple choice exams can tell us that a student is struggling in a particular area, they can tell us very little about why a student might be struggling in this area. In further drawing out reasons to be skeptical of standardized tests, Schneider points out that test results tend to correlate uncomfortably with such non-school factors as, for example, parent education level. This suggests “that tests often tell us more about students’ home lives than about schools” (p. 21). Schneider’s critique, here, is not as broad or single-minded as the one found in, say, Diane Ravitch’s Death and Life of the American School System (2011), but critique is not his main project. He only needs to set up his counterpunch: the creation of measures that matter.

With his case against standardized testing established, Schneider pivots to the real purpose of his text: finding a better way to evaluate schools. Schneider and his team start with the simple question, “What does a good school do?” and then set out to find the answer through a variety of sources. Using Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Tamara Wilder’s (2008) Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right as a guide, Schneider and his team consult national polling data to construct the Somerville school quality framework. From this general sense of what Americans value in education, Schneider and his associates make it local by surveying and interviewing Somerville residents — parents, teachers, students, community members — to see how closely their values align with the national sources. Thus, through a process of compilation and distillation, Schneider ends up with an exceedingly detailed, multifaceted school quality framework that is at once locally responsive and strikingly universal in identifying what matters most in schools.

Schneider’s straightforward approach to exceedingly complex issues is appealing, particularly his ability to be commonsensical without compromising depth of inquiry. There seems to be a tendency in texts of this kind either to get unnecessarily bogged down in philosophical arguments, or to play “inside baseball,” using educational acronyms and jargon to speak to a highly specialized audience while repelling the lay reader. Schneider does neither. Additionally, Schneider seems to have little interest in defending any particular set of political or philosophical commitments; rather, he considers the conception of school quality in a holistic sense—one well-suited to addressing
the multidimensionality of America itself, a smart choice in today’s polarized political climate.

Not only does Schneider lay out a variety of quality measures which allow us to make better sense of what we mean by good schools, but he takes care to develop a clear rationale for each of the identified essential factors, and that attention to rationale is important. One of the principal problems we face in education is the constant disconnect between educational jargon and what that jargon really means when it comes to schools. Schneider’s easy, effective prose speaks to an audience of community members without sacrificing any of the intellectual capital expended on this project. In fact, he purposely concludes each subsection of the essential inputs and key outcomes with individualized lists of questions which one might ask principals, teachers, and parents in relation to said subcategory. In a real sense, the substantive subsection of Beyond Test Scores reads much like a user’s manual for school governance, which is quite refreshing for coauthor and Head of School Seth Yocum, who often finds himself weighed down in theoretical work that leaves one wondering, “But how?”

It is difficult to find many faults in this book. Schneider’s thoroughness in contextualizing the problem, the relevance and timeliness of the topic, the unique approach he takes in inviting the voices of a plurality of stakeholders in a project to define quality education, and the transparency of his professional practice all contribute to the power and credibility of his work. While that thoroughness and transparency of practice occasionally detract from the “pleasurable read” quotient, that’s a minor and stylistic complaint. It will not be news to anyone that the book is not intended for beach reading. Schneider’s intention is to simply make good on the promise of walking the reader through better ways to identify and measure school quality, and he certainly accomplishes that aim. Moreover, by devoting the necessary time to detailing the entire process, start to finish, he left us not only inspired toward action, but with the necessary blueprint to do so.

The American public school system is likely the greatest democratizing institution our country still maintains. Although imperfect in many ways, it continues to proxy for the American dream and the opportunities we all hope to enjoy. To be sure, this is no small mantel. And if our intentions are to improve the function and value of our public schools, we must have a better way to identify, understand, and measure them. We have known for decades that standardized tests alone do as much to confuse the conversation as they have to clarify it. Yet to date there have been few good alternatives, ones that would be comprehensive in their view, nuanced in their level of detail, and sufficiently authoritative for state purposes. What Schneider does here in Beyond Test Scores: is to offer just such an alternative, one that honors the plurality of stakeholders that lay claim to any given American public school. And although Schneider’s response may harbor flaws, his book gives us a clearer picture of the work that lies ahead in American public education.

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References
